

Exploring the space between teacher education and beginning primary teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand: Where does the music programme fall?

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Abstract

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the music programme in primary (elementary) schools is usually the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher. In recent years there have been growing concerns among music educators about: the decrease in pre-service teacher education hours for music; the dismantling of teacher advisory services in music; and the apparent decrease in the amount of music taught in primary classrooms. These concerns reflect the emphasis on literacy and numeracy achievement in the primary school and the subsequent marginalisation of subjects like music in the wider curriculum.

Teacher education students also report that they have little opportunity to see music taught as part of the classroom programme and therefore lack models for how they can establish their own programmes as beginning teachers. In my work as a pre-service music teacher educator, I have been puzzled by the gap between new graduates' espoused wishes to develop music as part of their classroom programmes and the reality. This paper outlines a research project that aims to investigate the nature of the space between the initial teacher education programme and the

development of the core classroom music programme, and to put in place supportive structures and processes for the development of music programmes.

Keywords

Beginning teachers; primary school music programmes; collaborative action research; communities of music practice.

Introduction

Teacher education graduates complete their studies with high hopes for their practice in the real world of the classroom. In general terms, these beginning teachers are provided with significant support and encouragement to bring their hopes to fruition. In New Zealand primary (elementary) schools where music education is usually the responsibility of the generalist classroom teacher, beginning teachers with music performance strengths are likely to become involved in extra-curricular music groups, even without support or encouragement. However for many new graduates, dreams of a vital classroom music programme too often fall into an unexplored space between initial teacher education and their first teaching position. If these hopes for a classroom music programme are not realised early in teachers' careers, confidence to pursue the dream diminishes over time. A music programme becomes set in concrete as 'something I would like to have in the future', a future that never quite arrives.

Within the teacher education context, students who complete music education classes, even those of short duration, frequently demonstrate a sense of excitement about including music in their

soon-to-be classes. They reflect on what it has meant for them to experience music learning and teaching within their own teacher education programmes, and write and speak eloquently about their commitment to providing music for the children in their care. They bemoan the minimal amount of music learning in their programmes and the few opportunities to see music being well taught (or even taught at all!) in their practicum schools and classes. The following message to a teacher education tutor illustrates the optimism of a new graduate:

Music has always played a big part in my life, it is a bit like air for me...I can't live without it.

Your teaching has been inspiring, the assignments enjoyable, challenging, stretching and so useful to take into the class. I have loved every session and learnt so much. I only wish we could have done more over the time we have been at university.

Thank you for your time, patience and expertise in teaching us to play the ukulele. I find I play it most days and it's perfect when I am feeling overwhelmed by the workload...I just play and 'enjoy'. I have taken it to school when I am relieving and it is like a breath of fresh air in the class. The challenge now is to make time to put music into the class and lives of the students I will teach. (Personal communication, October 2011)

What then is the experience of these students as they enter the teaching profession? In the current curriculum and policy environment in Aotearoa New Zealand, the overwhelming emphasis for beginning teachers is on establishing literacy and numeracy programmes and processes to the exclusion of broader curriculum imperatives. 'Other' learning areas such as music, science, social studies or physical education are often subsumed within integrated or inquiry units, allowing little opportunity to establish discipline-specific programmes that build teachers' pedagogy, and students' musical skills and knowledge, in a planned and intentional way.

Beginning teachers are given little, if any, encouragement to establish a music programme in the first weeks of teaching and apart from the ubiquitous assembly or team singing, there may be little other evidence of music happening in the school.

Ironically, at the same time that primary school teachers are feeling pushed to increase the amount and the standardised nature of literacy and numeracy teaching in their classrooms, there is also widespread concern about children who fail to thrive within the New Zealand education system and whose low achievement in the core curriculum areas can be attributed in part to low engagement with school learning (Drummond, 2003). However a range of research findings attest to the power of music and the other arts (well-taught) to engage students and teachers in the learning process (Eisner, 2005; O'Connor & Holland, 2004; Boyack, 2011). They suggest that a great deal of music activity in schools is consistent with Wenger's (1998) description of practice communities as leading to a particular kind of knowing concerned with "being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human" (p.134).

Currently, limited recognition of professional development needs in music make it difficult for school-based music leaders to support their less confident colleagues in systematic ways.

Although there is some research evidence of less-experienced teachers being mentored by their more expert peers to take on music leadership roles in the future (see for example, Boyack, 2011), we know little about teachers who may be on the cusp of music teaching practice or music leadership in their schools, but have not been sufficiently mentored or have not had a potential gift identified. Studies focused on providing appropriate support for beginning music teachers could serve as encouragement for other generalist primary school teachers who would like to be

more involved in the music in their schools but lack the confidence or the opportunities to reach towards this goal. Investing time and resources in developing communities of music practice between teachers could deliver positive musical and extra-musical outcomes for teachers and children in primary schools.

Universities and schools in partnership are well-placed to share responsibility for ensuring that primary schools continue to have the services of capable music leaders, teachers whose identity as musicians is woven tightly within their overall teacher identity. A starting point may be the provision of coordinated support for beginning teachers, in particular, the development of supportive structures that enable key teachers to develop strong music programmes in a policy environment that may not be sympathetic to such an aim.

The Proposed Research

The proposed research project aims to investigate the nature of the space between the completion of a primary teacher education programme and the development of a core classroom learning programme that includes music. The power of music to refresh and nurture; music's contribution to a lively social environment; music's potential to engage minds, hearts and bodies; all these are commonly-reported experiences for teachers during their own teacher education music programmes. Although they believe that music can have these same benefits for the children they teach, a likely challenge for beginning teachers is to overcome the barriers that school systems place around setting up a music programme. Where other teaching colleagues have the skills to help them overcome these barriers, they may lack the time and resources to do so.

We can speculate that a lack of explicit support stemming from music's marginal status is the primary cause of music programmes not springing up in new graduates' classrooms, but there may be a range of other, albeit connected, reasons. Faced with the reality of a classroom of energetic children, and the memory of a so-called expert music teacher in their teacher education programme, a beginning teacher may overestimate what is required to introduce simple music-making into the classroom equation. Anxiety about dealing with musical content and classroom management can cause inexperienced teachers to keep thinking and delay acting. The public nature of music-making may be another disincentive to 'strike out the band'. Understanding more about *how* and *why* music falls 'between the cracks' is an essential step on the way to finding a route across the divide.

Underlying this focus on beginning teachers is a belief that core programmes are laid down as routine and accepted aspects of any teacher's *modus operandi* in the earliest days of their career. For music to become an accepted part of the classroom programme and one that is expected by the children in a class, such an expectation needs to be established early in the teacher's tenure with that class and as part of their overall teaching repertoire. For most beginning teachers, the challenge of introducing music in the classroom on top of the accepted 'core curriculum' of literacy and numeracy may prove too much. This leaves us with an unanswered question about whether practical support from an outside music educator may be sufficient to bridge the gap between aspiration and actuality.

There is an exciting role for university-based researchers to bridge a frequently-perceived divide between universities and the schools and communities they serve. Teachers often participate in

educational research that doesn't deliver much back to them in terms of usable knowledge. Equally, researchers often complain about the lack of uptake on their findings among the teaching population. Although in this case the researcher is entering the field with a sense of direction, the initial focus is to explore the 'space between' and to assist in bridging that space. The aim of the research is to benefit and enrich the practice of beginning teachers, the children they teach, and indirectly, the life of their schools. An additional aim for the researcher is to develop a process that may spark similar kinds of studies and contribute to our understanding of subject marginalisation within the primary curriculum, its root causes and effects, and the potential for change. These aims suggest that an appropriate methodology is that of collaborative action research (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Sewell, A.M, 2006) in which the researcher works alongside participants to understand and define the research problem and questions, and to identify and document appropriate processes for addressing the questions. Action research by definition is speculative and its outcomes are uncertain, and the role of the initiating researcher is flexible and open.

In order to understand more of what does occur for beginning teachers in relation to the establishment of a classroom music programme, the researcher will seek five or six participants from among the beginning teachers in one town or district. Initially, they will meet as a focus group to identify potential barriers to classroom music teaching and to discuss the kind of support from the researcher that would enable them to begin leading simple classroom music lessons from early in the school year. The level and nature of that support would vary according to individual teachers' confidence and musical interests. For example, some teachers may want initial lessons to focus on establishing a singing culture within the classroom and the

development of a shared song repertoire. Others may wish to bring out the ‘box of classroom instruments’ from the outset and to put in place appropriate management systems and routines to increase the chances of success and pleasure for teacher and children. Some participants may want the researcher to be present in the classroom for these lessons, as a backstop or prompt to ensure that everything proceeds according to plan, while others may appreciate help with planning and preparation but prefer to teach alone. Whatever the circumstances of the sessions, reflection following each teaching episode would provide important data for subsequent discussion and analysis (Schön, 1983).

In addition to the supportive relationship between the researcher and the individual beginning teachers, the network of beginning teachers will be a central feature of the research. The teachers will be invited to participate in regular half-day music professional development workshops in their first year of teaching. Initially the researcher will lead these workshops in response to particular issues raised by the beginning teachers. However as the year progresses the teachers will be encouraged to take on more of a leadership role, to share aspects of their music teaching practice in the wider group, and to learn from each other’s successes and challenges.

A second network will comprise a similar number of experienced teachers who have an established profile as music leaders in their schools and who are interested in taking on a mentoring role for the beginning music teachers. Ideally, these teachers would be drawn from the beginning teachers’ own schools but alternatively from within the same town or district. Mentor teachers will be invited to participate in workshops that address generic and subject specific aspects of mentoring, and to take part in planning mentoring initiatives that can be adopted in their school or town. These could involve such events as music exchanges between schools, or

informal music festivals that emphasise participation and shared performance opportunities.

Alternatively they could lead to pairs of mentors and beginning teachers leading music professional development events at school staff meetings or preparing units of work for trialling with other interested teachers. Agendas for the mentoring workshops will be drawn up in consultation with the beginning teacher participants, with reference to mentor teachers' own experiences as beginning teachers and mentors, and to relevant research literature.

As the year progresses, the researcher will provide written accounts of aspects of the research for discussion. In addition, there will be opportunities for all participants to contribute through discussion and their own writing to a multi-faceted account of both the research problem (the space between) and the action to address the problem. Emerging findings in relation to individual and collective understandings of the nature of the space between teacher education and beginning teaching will be analysed in relation to the music education literature relating to generalist teacher development as well as literature on communities of practice.

There is a clear difference between the aspirations of primary education graduates in relation to classroom music programmes and what happens in practice. Research that addresses the issue has the potential to enrich the musical life of classrooms and schools and to contribute in positive ways to teachers' and children's experiences of school. Such a possibility is sufficient justification for undertaking the journey.

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